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AUTHOR Jacobs, Geralyn M.; Crowley, Kathy
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses four thematic units that teachers can use with preschool and primary grades, along with examples of activities that can be integrated into each unit. The units include "Land of Many Colors," based upon a book of the same name that tells the story of gingerbread-shaped characters who learn to accept each other even though they are different colors. The next unit, "Seasons," is developed around a collection of children's literature that focuses on seasonal themes. The third unit, "Habitats," focuses on animal habitats and children's books that explore the issue. "Dinosaurs," the fourth unit, uses books on dinosaurs and various activities to explore the world of dinosaurs. Specific science, math, social studies, and art activities for each unit are presented. (Contains 29 references.) (MDM)

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Weaving an Integrated Curriculum

A Paper Presented at the
Midwest Association for the Education of Young Children

Peoria, Illinois
April 22, 1994

by Geralyn M. Jacobs, Ed.D.
and Kathy Crowley

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There has been a great deal of interest in finding developmentally appropriate ways to help children learn. Several early childhood experts have suggested that this may best be accomplished when all areas of the curriculum are integrated so that children can see the interrelatedness of all the things they are learning. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) states in their publication, Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8, that appropriate practice for four and five year old children involves integrating all areas of the curriculum through meaningful activities such as building, measuring sand and water, observing changes in the environment, exploring animals and plants, painting, and working with clay. NAEYC guidelines for the primary grades state that in a developmentally appropriate classroom, "The curriculum is integrated so that learning occurs primarily through projects, learning centers, and playful activities that reflect current interests of children (p. 68)."

Integrating the curriculum is in keeping with John Dewey's ideas that children learn best when ideas are presented in an integral, meaningful context. One way to begin integrating the curriculum for young children in preschool, kindergarten, and the primary grades is to work together with the students to choose a meaningful theme that will hold the interest of the children. Once a theme has been chosen, activities can be developed that will carry out the theme. This article will explore several different thematic areas that teachers could share with young children, and provide examples of activities that could be integrated into each theme.

Often a theme will develop around a particular piece of good children's literature. The first theme that will be discussed is a multicultural unit, which could be called, **"The Land of Many Colors"**, based on the book by the same title written by the children of the Klamath County YMCA Family Preschool. The Land of Many Colors is the story of gingerbread-shaped characters who learn to accept each other even though they are different colors. Other books that could be used in this thematic unit are: Families are Different by Nina Pellgrini; We're Different, We're the Same, by Bobbi Kates; and different versions of "The Gingerbread Man" story. The theme could be introduced by reading these books, followed by a variety of writing activities. After reading the book, The Land of Many Colors, children could write their own book or write a class book together on the theme of living together peacefully. For a social skills or social studies activity, children could discuss the theme of peace as presented in the book. They could then write or dictate short poems on the theme of peace and acceptance of others. These poems could be placed on water color background pictures painted by the children and used to make a truly child-centered bulletin board.

There are a number of activities that could be done after reading The Land of Many Colors that relate to gingerbread people, the shape of the characters in the book. The class could bake a gingerbread boy and then go out to recess. When they return from their play, the gingerbread boy could be gone. In his place could be a note explaining that he had run away, but could be found in a certain room in the school, such as the gym. When the children arrive in the gym they could find another note revealing that the gingerbread boy had gone to the principal's office, then the library, and so on. The gingerbread boy hunt would continue until the last note led the

children to the cafeteria, or back to their own room where smaller gingerbread boy cookies (along with the larger one who ran away!) could be waiting. Later in the week, the children could dictate or write stories about the gingerbread hunt on gingerbread shaped paper.

A science unit on the five senses could be integrated into this theme, beginning with the sweet smell of baking gingerbread cookies. As part of this unit, the children could participate in making playdough with cinnamon and vanilla added to give the playdough a cookie scent. The class could play a listening game in which one child, or a pair of children, leave the room while a cooking timer, which has a gingerbread shape taped to it, is hidden. The child, or pair of children, could then try to follow the sound to the hidden gingerbread boy.

Math activities could be integrated into this unit by providing laminated gingerbread shapes of different sizes at a center where children could sort the shapes by size. These shapes could also be used by the children to create patterns (such as big - little - little / big - little - little). The shapes could also be used to make graphs which would allow the children to visually compare the number of small gingerbread shapes with the number of larger gingerbread shaped cut-outs. Older children could add and subtract with the gingerbread shapes. Social studies activities could include making maps of the gingerbread hunt and expand from there to making other simple maps.

A number of art activities could be available to the children in this unit, including having gingerbread shapes cut out of large manila paper at the easel for painting. A center could also be set up for the children to decorate construction paper gingerbread

shapes with ric-rac, buttons, ribbon, markers, and crayons.

The next theme, **"Seasons"** was developed around a collection of excellent children's literature, including: Frederick and A Busy Year by Leo Lionni; Blueberries for Sal by Robert McCloskey; My Favorite Time of Year by Susan Pearson; Jamberry by Bruce Degan; Apples and Pumpkins and My Spring Robin by Anne Rockwell; and Planting a Rainbow by Lois Ehlert. After reading several of these books to the children, they can be encouraged to make their own book of the seasons. This could be done during a class writing time or at a class writing center. In the primary grades, the teacher could suggest that the children choose a character for a story and then each day compose a new page with the character experiencing a different season. Preschool children could sponge paint a page for each season of the year with shapes such as snowpeople, bunnies, flowers, and pumpkins and then dictate a sentence for each page.

The theme of seasons lends itself to a number of science activities. One activity, especially good for kindergarten and primary children is to "Adopt A Tree". This activity would ideally begin the first week of fall. The children could be given a piece of paper containing the basic outline of a tree without leaves. The class would then walk outside to a designated area, and each child would be asked to "adopt" a tree to observe and record changes they see during the next few weeks. As they sit under their tree, the children can be asked to act as scientists and add leaves to the outline of their tree picture to make it look as much like their adopted tree as possible. This activity is repeated each week in autumn, until all the leaves have fallen from the trees. This drawing activity is especially fun when done on a clipboard that could be

requested as part of the children's basic school supplies. Another easy science activity involves making a bird feeder using pine cones. Children can spread peanut butter on the cones with popsicle sticks and then roll the pine cones in bird seed. Yarn or string is then attached to the cones for hanging. Planting different kinds of seeds and observing and recording their growth is another wonderful science activity that fits into the theme of seasons. Field trips to pumpkins patches, orchards, vineyards, and farms provide rich experiences for the students. If there is a park nearby, the children can visit it once each season and observe the changes that take place throughout the year.

Math activities could be planned around apples, pumpkins, or other seasonal fruits and vegetables. The children can estimate the number of seeds in an apple or pumpkin and then count the actual number of seeds found when it is cut open. The seeds can be sorted and classified at a learning center. This activity could also lead into introducing the concept of fractions with older children. The book Eating Fractions by Bruce McMillan can be integrated into the unit, illustrating the concept of fractions, as well as providing recipes to enrich the experience.

A wide variety of art activities may be planned using the theme of seasons. Seeds from the math activities can be provided for collages and other types of art projects. If this unit is done in the winter, an art center can be set up with geometric shapes cut out of construction paper for creating snowpeople or snow scenes. Literature can be continually woven back into the unit with the addition of books such as Sadie and the Snowman by Allen Morgan and Bob the Snowman by Loretan and Lenica, which will also present the children with simple science concepts.

A bulletin board for this unit may be developed by cutting out large block letters, spelling out the word "APPLES". The children can decorate the letters with apple prints by dipping apple halves into red paint and pressing the apples onto the letters. Afterwards, the children could dictate simple poems describing the taste of apples. The poems could then be displayed on the bulletin board around the apple-printed letters.

Older children can learn social studies concepts in this thematic unit by studying pioneers and how they adapted to life in different seasons. They could also study seasons around the world, including different temperature zones, time zones, and geographical areas.

"**Habitats**" is another theme that can be developed for young children. There are a number of excellent books that can be used to introduce children to the idea of habitats. Suggested books for this theme are: A House for Hermit Crab by Eric Carle; Charlotte's Web by E.B. White; and The Snail's Spell and Chipmunk Song by Joanne Ryder. A writing activity could be incorporated into this unit by asking older primary children to do research on a particular animal and to write a report about the animal and its habitat. Words such as "sea", "forest", "nest", or "den" could be used as spelling words for these children during the unit. Younger children could dictate stories about animals and their habitats.

Science activities for this theme can come alive by creating habitats in the classroom. These can be commercially purchased or constructed by teachers, students, and parents. An easy example of a classroom habitat would be the introduction of an aquarium that could house fish, snails, turtles, hermit crabs, or frogs.

Guinea pigs make wonderful classroom pets and can be housed in a large aquarium or cage. Habitats for frogs, butterflies, and ants can also be obtained through educational catalogs and provide excellent experiences for the children.

Books with habitat themes, such as On Busy Street by Judith Worthy or Anno's Counting Book by Mitsumasa Anno can help introduce math concepts. Other math activities could include classifying animals according to their habitats or making graphs using animals and their homes. Classroom animals could be weighed on a weekly basis and students could chart their growth throughout the year. Older children could do multiplication problems involving animals and their habitats with problems such as, "How many bags of bedding will we need in ten months if we use two bags each month for our classroom pet?" or "How many lions would there be in two dens if there were four lions in each den?"

Social studies activities could bring out multicultural concepts by discussing the habitats of people around the world. Children could learn how people adapt to their environment by reading books which explore these topics. Different types of homes could be discussed and models of each could be constructed.

Art centers can be planned to expand the theme of habitats. A painting center can be stocked with paper cut in animal shapes for the children to paint. The following week children could choose paper cut in the shape of animal habitats, such as dens, fish bowls, nests, etc. to paint or decorate with a selection of art supplies or natural materials, such as grasses and twigs. Finally, a variety of house shapes can be available at the center for painting and decorating. Playdough or clay can be used at another center for sculpting habitats, or for simply having fun using animal-shaped

cookie cutters. The children can be actively involved in making a large mural of different habitats for the classroom. Each habitat could be labeled and studied individually, leading to additional science discoveries. Another mural could be made by focusing on one habitat, such as the rainforest, with each child making a life-size model of an animal who lives there.

"**Dinosaurs**" is a popular theme that often interests young children. There are many books written especially for children about dinosaurs. Some of their favorites include: Patrick's Dinosaurs and What Happened to Patrick's Dinosaurs by Carol Carrick; Ride a Red Dinosaur by David Collins; If the Dinosaurs Came Back by Bernard Most; My Visit to the Dinosaur by Aliki; and Dinosaur, Dinosaur by Byron Barton. For a fun writing activity the whole class could compose a big book writing on large, dinosaur shaped paper. Children could also be encouraged to write a simple dinosaur story to accompany dinosaur artwork they've created. Words like, "dinosaur", "egg", and "volcano" could be used as spelling words for the week. Children could also develop a dinosaur fact book, either individually or as a group.

Science activities could center around building a volcano with plaster of paris and later combining baking soda and vinegar inside the volcano to cause an "eruption". Dishwashing liquid and red food coloring can be added to a vinegar and baking soda solution at another time for the children to observe the differences in the chemical reactions. Younger students would enjoy "hatching a dinosaur". This activity involves setting up a nest of dinosaur eggs and asking the children to predict what is inside the eggs. The teacher can make the eggs in advance by placing tiny plastic dinosaurs inside a plastic egg shell which is filled with wet plaster of paris. If the shell

is greased with petroleum jelly before adding the plaster of paris, the shell can be easily removed when the plaster dries. This leaves the plaster in the shape of the egg with a baby dinosaur hidden inside. At the end of the unit, students can use problem solving skills to decide how to "hatch" the eggs to discover what is inside.

Math activities could begin by having students and teachers research together to discover the actual size of dinosaurs. A life size dinosaur can then be drawn on the playground using the actual dinosaur measurements. Children could be asked to estimate how many of them could fit inside the dinosaur shape and then they could actually step inside to see how close their estimation was. A life size paper dinosaur could be drawn from the researched measurements and hung on the wall for students to compare their height to that of a dinosaur. A life sized dinosaur footprint could also be drawn on paper and students could again estimate how many of their footprints would fit inside. Then students could trace their own footprint on paper, cut it out, and paste it to the dinosaur footprint, providing a rich, concrete visual demonstration of their math experience. A simple math center could be set up by providing a balance scale and plastic dinosaur counters for students to play with and explore. Dinosaur counters could also be used for making patterns, counting, and doing simple math problems.

The dinosaur theme lends itself to social studies activities as children explore ancient life and archeology. An archeology "prop box" could be set up for children to play with in the dramatic play area. Items in the prop box could include an archeologist's hard hat, magnifying glasses, gloves, brushes, sifting screens, and bleached chicken bones. The bones can be hidden in the sandbox for "excavation" by

the children. Children can learn more about fossils by creating their own fossil replicas. This can be done by pouring plaster of paris into empty half pint milk cartons and firmly placing a greased seashell in the top. When the shell is removed, the imprint of the shell remains as a fossil they can take home and share with their families.

Art activities for this theme can be done at centers provided with dinosaur shaped sponges, manila paper, and paint. These materials can be replaced after a few days by a variety of paper cut into dinosaur shapes. Markers, crayons, and various types of paint can be used on these shapes. A shiny paint mixture can be made by mixing food coloring with white corn syrup. This mixture can be painted on the dinosaur shaped paper using Q-tips. (Caution, this paint remains sticky, especially in warm weather.) Children can also paint on dinosaur shapes using small, square sponges, dipped in green, brown, and yellow paint. These dinosaurs can then be used to make a large bulletin board or mural, with the addition of palm tree cut-outs and stories of dinosaurs which the children have created.

Thematic units can be developed by early childhood educators to make learning meaningful and developmentally appropriate for their students. Thematic activities should be based on the natural interests of young children. Through thematic units, teachers can weave an integrated curriculum involving all areas of a child's development. Children learn best in concrete, experiential ways. The thematic activities described in this article allow children to learn by actively experiencing the world in which they live.

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